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THE SILVER STUDIO (1880 - 1963)

A DESIGN PRACTICE AT WORK

The Silver Studio was a commercial design practice, which between 1880 and 1963 completed more than 20,000 schemes for items such as furnishing fabrics, wallpapers, tablecovers, rugs and carpets. The Studio answered the needs of its customers, who were retailers and manufacturers at all levels of the market. It could work in all the popular styles of the moment, offering traditional patterns alongside the more 'modern', such as Art Nouveau at the turn of the century and Moderne in the 1930s. Many of its clients were mass producers and Silver Studio designs therefore found their way into numerous British homes.

After it closed, the contents of the Silver Studio - artwork, record books, photographs, correspondence and so on - were given to Hornsey College of Art, which became part of what is now Middlesex University. This material is the focal collection of the Museum of Domestic Design & Architecture (MoDA). In 2008, the Silver Studio Collection was awarded Designated Status in recognition of its quality and importance as a national resource.

A Late Nineteenth-Century Studio

In 1880 a young designer, Arthur Silver, set up an independent commercial studio. For a time he had worked alone, as a freelance, but then decided that several designers together would be more efficient, as they could share their particular skills and knowledge. In an interview in a new arts magazine, *The Studio*, in 1894, he said that he had 'attempted to bring together a body of men and establish a studio which would be capable of supplying designs for the whole field of fabrics and other materials used in the decoration of the house'. This was an established system in France, whose studios had been very successfully supplying British manufacturers for many years, but it appears to have been something of an innovation in this country. A design practice of this sort could cater to a range of customers, taking full account of their practical needs, but could offer more variety and innovation than was customary in manufacturers' own in-house studios.



left Arthur Silver and his wife, Isabella, c. 1885 (SE 13)

right Silver Studio record books, 1890s - 1930s



Unfortunately, the Silver Studio's early records are incomplete and we cannot piece together a clear picture of its organisation at this point. But we do know that, in the early 1890s, Silver employed at least two other designers - Harry Napper and John Illingworth Kay - and a photographer to make a record of all the designs.

Silver never achieved quite the public recognition of freelance designers like CFA Voysey, but it was a time when there were increasing efforts to professionalise designing and he became well known in his field. He had trained at Reading School of Art and as an apprentice to the freelance designer, HW Batley. The Silver Studio became successful and he showed at the Arts & Crafts Society Exhibitions between 1889 and 1896 and was elected a member of the Royal Society of Arts in 1893. From 1893 he and his practice received considerable notice in *The Studio*. He contributed to a book (*Practical Designing: a handbook on the preparation of working drawings*, 1894, edited by his friend Gleeson White). He gave lectures, was quoted and reviewed, and was generally part of the design circuit. Napper and Illingworth Kay were less well known but examples of their work also featured in *The Studio*. Napper was a member of the Art Students' Guild (later the Junior Art Workers' Guild) and Illingworth Kay was a founder member of the Society of Designers, which was set up in 1896 to 'advance the Arts of Design and the status of designers'.

Arthur Silver died in 1896, at the early age of 43. Napper stayed on for two years, as the Silver Studio's manager: Illingworth Kay seems to have left in 1900 when he became chief designer for the wallpaper firm, Essex & Co. As manager, Napper's income was quite substantial. In 1897-8 he earned £353.15s. - about the same as a chemist or a small-town bank manager. But his successor, JR Houghton, was paid a little less - between £250 and £300 a year. We do not know how much any junior designers earned but when Reginald (known as Rex) Silver, Arthur's 17-year-old son, came into the Studio to learn the business in 1896, his annual wage was only £17.10s.

In the early 1890s the Studio was regularly producing more than 500 designs a year. Selling them was another part of the operation. Silver would show a selection to the buyers of many of the major textile, wallpaper and carpet producers and at this period appears to have sold between 170 and 300 a year. Letters from a trip to Manchester, centre of much textile and wallpaper production, show that this could be very exhausting.



The Silver Studio in the Twentieth Century

By 1901 Rex Silver was old enough and experienced enough to take over the Studio. He ran it until 1963, two years before his death. He kept excellent records, many of which have survived, providing very good evidence for the activities of the Studio during these 62 years.

The Studio always had to work hard to survive. There was still stiff competition from the large continental studios, such as that of Willy Hermann, and there were now more independent studios in Britain. Haward's, for example, established in West London in the late nineteenth century, was similar in size and output to the Silver Studio. Messrs CE Barker had five full-time designers and 15 pieceworkers as well as importing continental designs. Several large commercial studios in Manchester employed 30 or more staff. Manufacturers



and retailers also had their own in-house facilities. In 1935, the Cotton Printers Association had studios in Manchester, London and Paris, employing 180 designers. Individual freelance designers continued to have a high profile although estimates in the 1920s and 30s suggest that overall only about three percent of designs for prints came from this source.

Changing Fortunes

The Studio's fortunes fluctuated, partly due to external conditions. In 1914, at the start of World War One, many of the staff were serving in the forces and the remaining designers were put on half salaries until trading conditions improved. When Rex was called up the Studio had to close for a year. In April 1921, when the high cost of raw materials had a disastrous impact on the textile industry, the Studio's working hours were temporarily cut from 44 to 33 per week.

Its size varied considerably over the years. In 1908 there was Rex, his brother Harry Silver, and two or three assistants. (Harry was a talented designer who worked at the Studio until the First World War.) In 1922 there were 11 members of staff including Rex and the secretarial staff; in 1938 there were 14. During the Second World War, production of domestic textiles and wallpapers virtually ceased and there was only one designer, Frank Price, in the Studio itself although others, as always, worked from home. After the war, he was joined by a former employee, Lewis Jones. But when Jones died in 1952, Price continued as the sole in-house designer until the closure of the Studio in 1963.

The surviving records are incomplete but they do enable us to estimate the number of finished designs produced each year. (As a single design might have gone through several versions, there are more pieces of artwork than there were finished designs.) The Studio's most productive periods were 1891-1896 and 1924-1938. In those years (apart from 1893) the smallest number produced was about 400. It is interesting that the early 1930s, a time of national economic difficulty and crisis in the textile

left Fully finished design for printed textile, 1899, Harry Napper, Silver Studio (SD 3565)

right The Silver Studio photographed in 1967

industry, were a very fertile period for the Studio. In the mid 1920s and the mid 1930s over 800 designs were produced annually. Between 1940 and 1962, on the other hand, output averaged only 175 per year.

Making Designs

Designs were finished to varying degrees. There were fully worked, full-size, coloured schemes, accurately showing the whole pattern repeat. These were usually painted in watercolour or gouache on heavy paper. Little squares were painted in the margin to show the individual colours clearly. A design in this state would probably not need any alteration by the manufacturer and could go straight to the roller-cutter or block-maker. But fully worked and coloured schemes took many hours to produce and were expensive. In 1894 a finished design could cost as much as £12. 12s., more than twice the weekly wage of the Studio's head designer at the time. In the late 1920s, £18.18s. was a normal price. In its early years, the Studio produced many finished designs speculatively. Later, though, it would generally only complete a scheme if a customer had asked for it. Once a design was sold it became the client's property, although preliminary drawings would usually have remained at the Studio.

Alternatively, customers could choose designs at one of the preliminary stages and either get them developed by their own designers or ask the Silver Studio for further work. The first stage was a 'miniature', a drawing, about one eighth of the full size, intended to give an overall impression of the whole pattern. However, when enlarged it could sometimes look rather different from the miniature version, leading to occasional complaints from customers.

much the customer would be prepared to pay. At the turn of the century a partially coloured but accurate sketch might be £1.10s. In the mid 1930s sketches seem to have ranged from £1 to £4.



The Studio would sometimes produce alternative 'colourways' of a pattern. A section of the complete design was traced onto small sheets of heavy paper, each one painted in different colour combinations. Occasionally, several colourways would be shown on a single full-scale design.



Designs were made in various media, reflecting the preferences of individual designers and the working methods prevalent at different periods. Sometimes special colours and papers were used to give the feel of the finished product.

left Miniature design for printed textile, 1910, Herbert Crofts, Silver Studio (SD 9269)

top right Partially coloured design for textile, c. 1895, Silver Studio (SD 11264)

bottom right Design for woven textile, 1933, Arthur Hogg, Silver Studio (SD 423). A small colourway to accompany the full-scale design.



The next stage was the 'sketch', usually done in black and white, often charcoal, on thin copy paper. This showed the pattern layout and repeat but was not accurately detailed or properly coloured. Sometimes the scheme would include a small coloured section. A sketch was more expensive than a miniature but considerably cheaper than a fully worked example. Prices varied, though, depending on the amount of time taken over the work and on how

but whose work was sold by the Studio. Harry Napper, for example, in the 1910s, worked in this way, paying a fee of one third of the proceeds to the Silver Studio. Napper's designs of this period have a very distinctive appearance; nonetheless it is interesting to see how different they are from his Art Nouveau patterns of the 1890s.

The Designers' Status

Rex Silver did little actual designing himself. Although artistically inclined, he did not go to art school; instead, he joined the Studio aged 17 and learned the business from the inside. His part in the process was to liaise with customers, set the briefs for the designers and discuss their work, which he did in great detail. As head of the Silver Studio he had some standing within the design world and was a member of a number of professional associations, such as the Design and Industries Association and the Royal Society of Arts. He was one of the first to be appointed to the National Register of Industrial Art Designers when it was set up in the late 1930s. Such memberships could lead to useful business contacts.

The situation was rather different for most of his staff. Although the evidence is not comprehensive, it appears to have been the case that they had attended a School of Art or a Technical Institute for several years. This was then followed by a period of 'apprenticeship' during which the fledgling designer learnt to produce technically usable and commercially saleable work. The pay of trainees at the Silver Studio depended upon their ability. A complete beginner in the 1930s might work for nothing for as long as a year, followed by only 10s. a week for another six months, until he or she was considered to be worth a proper wage.



Not that their incomes ever got to be high. In 1918 John van Tiffelen, who had been working in the Studio since 1911 and must by this time have been reasonably competent, obtained a pay rise - but it was only to £1.15s. a week. In 1935 Miss ED Whitehead started working at home for 6d. an hour plus payment for any of her designs sold. Clearly she was a good designer; for by the end of the year she was asked to work solely for Rex Silver. She was offered 1s. 3d. an hour (£2.10s. for a 40-hour week), roughly equivalent to the earnings of an unskilled labourer at the time. In 1939 juniors in the Silver Studio earned only £1.10s. or £1.15s. a week while Lewis Jones, the most senior designer, got £5.15s. They worked hard and the time they spent on each design was monitored so that the customer could be charged accordingly. Generally speaking, Silver Studio wages appear to have been rather lower than those offered in the big mill studios in the North of England. Rex Silver, as the Studio head, had a much higher salary - £2.10s. a week in 1906 and £11.0s. in 1925.

Although a number of the Studio workers left to set up as independent freelancers and took out membership of the National Register of Industrial Art Designers, those who stayed do not seem to have belonged to any professional association. Nor does service in a



left Colourway for printed textile design, 1950, Frank Price, Silver Studio (SD 7674)

right Design for printed textile, 1919, Harry Napper, Silver Studio (SD 2508)

Many of the Studio's designs for dress prints in the 1920s and 1930s were done in watercolour or crayon on tracing paper to represent the filmy silks and voiles that were popular at that time.



The Customer's Role

It is impossible to overestimate the part that the client played in the process of commercial design. Fortunately, we have enough of Rex Silver's voluminous correspondence with manufacturers and retailers to get a vivid picture of the relationship between designer and customer, especially in the 1920s and 1930s.

The majority of the Studio's designs were for printed textiles. (Owing to the complex manufacturing processes, designs for woven fabrics and, increasingly, wallpapers tended to be produced or finished in-house by the manufacturers' own designers and technicians.) Clients included well-known producers of high-quality, expensive goods such as Turnbull & Stockdale and Liberty. But the customers who bought the most designs were the big textile printers with mills in the Manchester region. John Hawkins and Sons Ltd, for example, sold high quality cotton goods at a low price by mail order as well as printing for other companies. R Denby & Son and Grafton Furnishings (part of the giant Calico Printers' Association) were also important clients.

Silver spent a very large part of his time dealing with customers or, more specifically, their design buyers. Sometimes they visited the Studio or Rex would go to their offices, especially if there was a London branch. However, in some instances, business would be conducted largely by post. Rex, or the Studio's representative, also went on selling trips both in this country and abroad. Buyers generally looked at a number of designs, in various stages. Often they retained some 'on approval' to think over at leisure. The Studio kept a meticulous record of who had taken which designs, and logged their return or retention.

Designs were sometimes bought 'as is', without any alterations. Generally, though, the client required further

work, often sending instructions by letter. There could be several additional drafts until a design was considered satisfactory. Customers could be very frank but Silver was always polite in his replies. He took up suggestions and then briefed his designers accordingly.

Styles and Trends

Occasionally clients would detail in advance the sort of pattern required, perhaps giving a written description or referring to an illustration in a book. More often they sent pieces of existing fabrics or wallpapers, with some additional directions. But most of the time it was the Silver Studio that generated the ideas. The designers had to keep abreast of current fashions. There was a well-stocked library of reference and picture books and a vast collection of cuttings from magazines and catalogues, illustrating both traditional styles and up-to-the-minute patterns. The designers went to museums to study and sketch historical examples - the Victoria and Albert Museum especially - and to exhibitions of contemporary work. They kept sketchbooks, often drawing from nature.



The Studio was always able to produce work in a variety of styles at any one time. Even when participating in the current up-to-date fashions, such as the Japanesque of the 1880s and 90s or the Moderne sunbursts and geometrics of the 1930s, it also continued to offer more traditional, often floral, patterns. As a commercial studio it had to satisfy its customers, relatively few of whom were prepared to take a risk with cutting-edge design. The Studio's output therefore tended to reflect existing trends rather than break new ground.

Unlike famous freelance designers whose individual 'handwriting' was a selling point, the Studio's staff had to put aside their personal preferences for the sake of the customer. Even so, several of them had their own specialisms. Miss Lawrence, in the 1920s and 1930s, was responsible for many charming and feminine small-patterned dress prints. Frank Price produced well-drawn traditional designs, often with late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century sources. There was more stylistic freedom for designers who were not directly employed

left Design for dress silk, 1928, Miss McPherson, Silver Studio (SD 1454)

right Design for printed textile, 1919, George Willis, Silver Studio (SD 21220)

commercial studio appear to have been a route to the fame, freedoms and attendant risks of the high profile freelancers. HC Bareham, for example, who had been a Studio employee, set up on his own account in Leytonstone, East London. But he never became well known and he continued to do a great deal of work for the Studio, particularly during and after the Second World War.

Designing as a Living

Most of the staff were men. In 1899 an advert for a new designer had specified 'Ladies need not apply'. Later, though, women were accepted. The most long-standing were Miss Winifred Mold, a Studio employee from 1912 to 1935, and Miss Madeleine Lawrence, 1918 to 1949. But they both worked from home. Rex Silver briefed them and criticised their work privately, either by letter or at their own homes. Sometimes they would come into the Studio itself. But, in spite of these visits, Miss Mold later remembered 'I never saw the room where the men worked'. It was not, though, a totally male environment. Miss Florence Cook, for example, was Rex's devoted secretary from 1918 to 1940. In the 1930s, Miss Varney was employed in the office and as a traveller, showing designs to customers around the country.

Over the years, many designers worked in the Studio. The fact that we know very little about most of them reflects the fact that to be a designer in a commercial studio was an ordinary sort of job. But it offered certain advantages and satisfactions over alternative employment, enabling people to use their artistic abilities. Miss Mold's story is a good example. She studied in the Art Department of the Paddington Technical Institute before becoming an apprentice at the Silver Studio. When World War One closed the Studio, she became a doll paintress. Although she was paid more, she did not like the work so much and was glad to return to the Silver Studio after the war. When one of her designs won a competition in the early 1920s, Rex Silver had the fabric made up into an eiderdown as a present for her. Working from home enabled her to deal also with her household duties until, in 1935, she



had to give up designing in order to care full-time for her parents. Some 45 years later she recollected: 'I enjoyed my work extremely, and though I did not get rich, I was very happy.....'

MoDA's Silver Studio collection has been granted Designated Status by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).

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Museums with Designated Collections provide high standards of care for their collections and make them accessible to visitors and researchers. The award reflects well on the museum as a whole, and on Middlesex University as the holding institution.

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right Design for printed textile, 1919, Winifred Mold, Silver Studio (SD 12739)



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